

THE BOOK REPORT

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Escape of British Double Agent Told by Rescuer

BY ROBERT KIRSCH
Times Book Critic

George Blake, one-time British Foreign Service officer, became a double embarrassment to Great Britain. In 1961, the Secret Service found out that Blake had been a double agent for the Russians and had given his employers "every document of any importance that came into my hands," including the names of the entire network of Western secret agents in Europe.

Then, after being sentenced to the longest term of imprisonment imposed under English law in modern times, Blake escaped from Wormwood Scrubs prison to Moscow in 1966.

Amazing Circumstances

That escape was at first attributed to professionals of the KGB, determined to rescue one of their number. But the actual circumstances are even more amazing. Blake was freed through the virtually single-handed efforts of an Irishman named Sean Bourke, who had been a prisoner in the jail, and who planned, rehearsed and carried through the break, as he claims, without any political goals or personal profit.

THE SPRINGING OF GEORGE BLAKE (The Viking Press: \$7.95) proves beyond a doubt that Bourke is the best writer to come out of Ireland since Brendan Behan. I won't vouch for the line-by-line truth of the narrative (although British critics generally did not question the accuracy of the account) but I will say that I haven't read any suspense fiction recently which touches this for excitement and readability.

Certainly, the amount of detail on the other side of credibility. Bourke, a natural writer, knows

how to exploit the dangling moment (his wait outside the Scrubs on the evening of the breakout is a classic, almost cinematic passage).

I am inclined somehow to doubt his motives. When the wife of one of his friends who helped him asks, "Why are you doing all this? Taking all these risks?" Bourke replies:

"I don't think that it is an altogether good idea to delve too deeply into people's motives. None of us are simple people . . . Blake, of course, is a friend of mine, but I don't deceive myself that my motivation is 100% altruistic. Perhaps I'm bitter. Perhaps I'm after some sort of revenge. But one thing I do know in my heart: I'd hate to see any man serving a sentence like that . . ."

This much we know to be true. Bourke had spent a good deal of his youth in reformatories, his adult life in jail. He hated the system. The challenge of beating it by delivering Blake could be motive enough. And as he began to use his imagination, pride must have taken over.

"There he was, the most important Communist spy in captivity in the Western World, a former Foreign office man and British secret agent, sitting in a cell under lock and key . . . and I, an Irishman, was sitting in my car outside in the street, a few yards from the prison Governor's front door, serenading this spy with an Irish song by means of a two-way radio hidden in a bunch of pink chrysanthemums. By any standards, it was an extraordinary situation."

Blake's relatives refused to give the 700 pounds ne-

cessary to finance the escape. Bourke raised it by borrowing. He recruited his own friends for the project. He bought a cheap two-way Japanese radio, slipped one to Blake by means of a helpful prison trusty, bought a second-hand car, rented a nearby apartment (where Blake hid while law enforcement officials guarded every port and airfield), managed to get Blake and himself behind the Iron Curtain.

The project took months while another escape tightened prison security and Bourke himself was in a halftone hostel at the prison. He lingers over the steps, the split-second timing, the near discovery, the incredible suspense of the last-minute moves.

There is more to this book than the escape. Fully half of it is devoted to Bourke's adventures with Blake in Moscow and his increasing disillusionment with the man he saved.

Appeared Cultured

In prison, Blake had appeared to him as a cultured, cool and deserving chap. But Bourke had not, in his careful assessment of the situation, reckoned with the skill a double agent must have to eclipse his true character.

When Bourke wanted to return to Ireland from Russia and asked Blake's aid, the latter replied: "I don't think you should be allowed to leave the Soviet Union. If you want to leave this country, that's your funeral. Don't come asking me for help."

Bourke managed without him, and managed to get his manuscript out of Russia. So there is a poetic justice in the tale. And more importantly, there is a rare and compelling situation by any who love adventure and suspense.

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